Writing for Interest and Understanding

In order to be effective, health education materials must attract the interest of the reader as well as reach the reader at his or her level of understanding. Concerned writers may think that writing for low-level readers will appear as condescending, especially if part of the target audience has higher reading skills. In fact, writing for low-level readers is about clarity and organization. Using language that is direct, simple, and clear produces materials that are best understood by any audience.

Here are some tips for making your writing both interesting and understandable for your audience:

Style

- Use action verbs and active voice
  a) With an active voice, the subject is the actor in the sentence:
     "After you have missed one period, come to the clinic for a pregnancy test. "
  b) With a passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon:
     "Pregnancy testing is done by the clinic after you have missed one period."
  c) Using the following tips makes recognition of the passive voice easier :
     - Passive voice uses a form of the verb "to be" (am, are, is, was, were, be, been, being).
     - Passive voice uses a verb ending in –en or –ed.
     - Passive voice may use a prepositional phrase starting with "by".
- Use a conversational and friendly style.
- Use concrete rather than abstract words.
- Avoid jargon (although there may be circumstances where some targeted messages may require the use of jargon used by target group members).

Ideas and concepts

- Ideas should flow in logical sequence.
- Use examples to clarify things your reader may never have experienced.
- Put the most important concepts first.
- Limit the number of concepts in one piece of written material.
- Re-state and summarize the main points at the end.

- Focus on desirable behavior and action, rather than on facts – most people just want to know what to do.
- Explain basic concepts; do not assume that the reader knows them.

Word, sentence, and paragraph structure

- Avoid contractions.
- Avoid uncommon abbreviations.
- If you use an acronym, be sure to define what its letters mean.
    - For the first appearance in a document, write out what the acronym means, followed by the abbreviation: "You may qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) support."
    - For subsequent references, use the acronym alone: "To find out if you are eligible for TANF funds . . . "
- Keep the subject of sentence and the verb close together, and use a common sentence pattern throughout your document.
- In general, shorter is better: try to keep paragraphs between six and twelve lines, words to two to three syllables, and sentences to no more than fourteen words.
- Use frequent headings with paragraphs to signal what information will follow.

Readability testing

The goal of readability testing is to determine if the educational material you produce is written at a level that exceeds your audience's ability to understand it.

Most readability tests are based on two factors: word difficulty and sentence length. The most common formulas are the Flesch Reading Ease/Flesch-Kincaid Grade Score, the SMOG test (found at www.med.umich.edu/pteducation/read.html) and the Fry Readability Graph (found at www.med.virginia.edu/patient-ed/provider/read.html).

If your document is in electronic format, you can easily check its readability using the readability testing tools available in Microsoft Word, including both the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid tests. To use these tools, click on the spell-check icon in your main toolbar. When the correction window appears, click on the Options button. A control panel will appear; check the "Check readability statistics" box, and then click "OK".

After the grammar and spell check are completed, you will see a screen titled "Readability Statistics", which will give you information on "Counts" (number of

characters, words, sentences and paragraphs), "Averages" (sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, and characters per word), and "Readability" (percent of passive sentences, Flesch Reading Ease score, and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score).

Given that estimates put fifty percent of the United States population at or below the eighth-grade reading level, your materials should not exceed this level of writing on the Flesch-Kincaid scale. In terms of the Flesch Reading Ease Score, a minimum score for your writing should be sixty or above (on a 0-100 scale).

Keep in mind that none of the readability formulas measure whether or not the reader understands the intended measure. Readability formulas are most effective when used in combination with direct testing of your materials with your target audience.

Generating interest with words

Following are some promotional words that have been proven to attract readers' attention:

Free	Love	Guaranteed
You/Your	Introducing	Fun/Enjoy
How to	Save	Results
Benefit	Bargain	Discover
Money	Suddenly	Quick Tips
Value	Improvement	Breakthrough
Explore	Remarkable	Hurry
Revolutionary	Easy	Announcing
Challenge	Health	Amazing
Compare	Today	Magic
Just Arrived	Sensational	New
Safe	Now	Proven